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DEP finds French-named scapegoat for pumping waste water into bay

For a while I was mostly irritated with state officials for not making the phosphate industry clean up its own mess.

As you may know, when Mulberry Corp. declared bankruptcy -- funny how this supposedly vital industry can't pay its own bills -- it abandoned the defunct Piney Point phosphate operation and the environmental hazards it created.

So the state, at your expense, took over the job of protecting Bishop Harbor and Tampa Bay from Piney Point's nasty storage ponds.

The ponds held polluted water left over from the mining operation. If ignored, they would fill with rainwater, and either overflow or burst, spilling bad stuff into the bay.

The state's Department of Environmental Protection stumbled when it first took on the task and started partially treating the stored water and dumping it into the very bay being protected.

Bishop Harbor is not a harbor, by the way. Ships don't go there, and can't. It is a shallow, mangrove encircled little bay in Manatee County, a fishing and kayaking spot, and one of the most natural looking little saltwater scenes in Southwest Florida.

So then the DEP announced that its dumping there was causing problems. Good for it.

The DEP developed a better plan: Keep partially treating the Piney Point water, but barge it miles out into the deep water of the Gulf. There, the effects, if any, should be negligible.

That seemed like a great improvement. But there are not-in-my-backyarders even 40 miles out in the Gulf. Fishermen and some environmentalists objected.

So then I got irritated with them. Sure, they eventually won a concession that might be a good idea. The water would be dumped 120 miles out instead of 40. But delays and the longer trips slowed the process. And when the barge started operating, an equipment problem allowed it to dump only half a load each trip.

And it kept raining. So it wasn't a total shock when the DEP came out with bad news just over a week ago. With Tropical Storm Henri expected to dump torrential rains, a DEP spokeswoman announced an "emergency order."

"In light of current weather predictions" for as much as a foot of rain over that weekend, she said, dumping into Bishop Harbor would be resumed.

Well, it sounded like a crisis, so what could anyone do? I grumbled about those who had slowed the barge plan.

Well, folks, we were had.



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That dumping plan, minus a few tweaks, had been worked out before anyone at DEP had heard of Henri. It turns out that DEP officials had simply decided to get those ponds drained sooner. But they didn't want to hire a second barge. They wanted to go back to the Bishop Harbor dumping they had previously said was a bad idea.

You can imagine the flak that might have inspired.

But, luckily, there was this tropical storm. The whole thing could be unveiled as a vital precaution. Pumping began right away. And when Henri fizzled like a bottle of flat champagne, with rainfall but a fraction of that forecast, the pumping continued. The plan is to keep on pumping.

DEP manager Phil Coram now explains that the DEP doesn't want to seek an extension of the barge permit, which runs out at the end of November, though the barge will have hauled far fewer gallons than permitted.

Why not?

"There are emotions. There are politics," Coram said.

Yes, there would be objections to an extension. But there should be far bigger objections to dumping in little Bishop Harbor. If the DEP is about environmental protection, it should be among those making them.

Instead, it is promoting Bishop Harbor dumping, and even blamed the plan on a storm with French name.
